

GARY PAUL NABHAN

Chorus at the Dawn of Earth Day

EARLY ON in the winter of 1969–70, I was driving the great environmental prophet Barry Commoner from a small airport to my small college, where he was to speak to our student body, and I was first alerted to the possibility of a nationwide event in defense of Mother Earth.

Barry asked if I had heard about something called Earth Day, a series of “environmental teach-ins” that would be occurring at campuses across the country in a few months. I had no idea what he was talking about, and admitted as much. Barry laughed. “You’re not alone,” he said. “I’m not even sure what they’re talking about, and I’ve been doing this for decades.”

Before long, I’d signed on to work as an unpaid intern at the headquarters of Environmental Teach-In, Inc., in Washington DC, where preparations were being made for the first Earth Day. By doing so, I had broken my probation status at Cornell College, which had admitted me without a high school diploma on the condition that I stayed in good standing and didn’t skip class. Somehow I connived my professors into not counting my internship as an absence with the promise that I would report to them what I had learned at Earth Day headquarters.

I am turning in my mandated report now, just short of five decades overdue.

On arriving at the Teach-In offices in DuPont Circle, I volunteered to provide cartoons and graphics for the newsletter

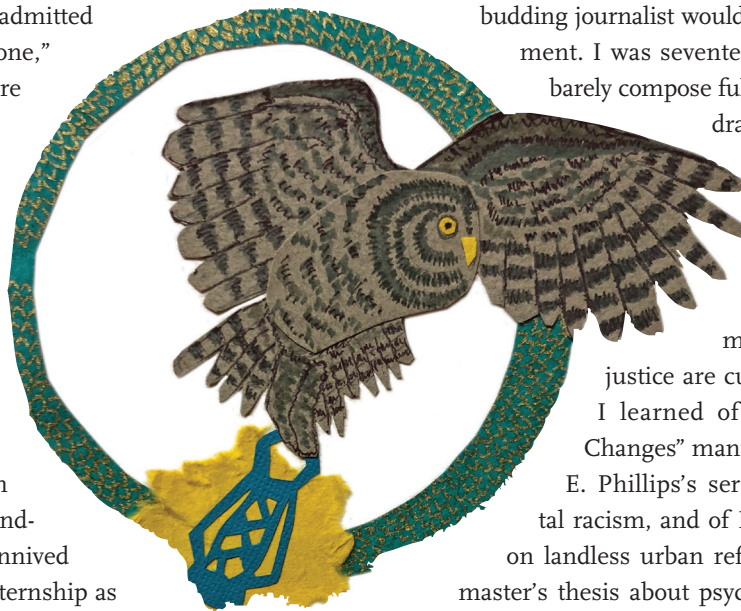
Environmental Action. (I had drawn political cartoons before, including a few that prompted my early departure from high school.) But my mentor, a civil rights activist named Sam Love, had just been given access to hundreds of cartoons on social and environmental justice by Ron Cobb of the *Los Angeles Free Press*.

“Didn’t you say you’ve done some writing?” Sam asked.

It’s true that I had, but what I hadn’t mentioned was that it was mostly poetry or short satirical pieces—not exactly what the newsletter was looking for. To call me a cub reporter or a budding journalist would be a massive overstatement. I was seventeen years old and could barely compose full sentences. All my first drafts looked like haiku.

Here is what I learned behind the scenes at Teach-In. I learned how to write. I learned that environmental justice and social justice are cut from the same cloth. I learned of Gary Snyder’s “Four Changes” manifesto, and of Channing E. Phillips’s sermons on environmental racism, and of Mildred Loomis’s tracts on landless urban refugees. I learned that a master’s thesis about psychedelic-induced ethnobotany was beginning to make waves, months before it was published as *The Teachings of Don Juan*. I learned about lead poisoning among urban children, catfish growth from heat pollution, cancer rates in park maintenance crews.

I learned too that you can burn yourself out. One morning, a colleague emptied his desk into the trashcan and announced



Saint Francis . . . the patron saint of ecology . . . urged his followers, “go out and preach the Good News, and only when necessary, use words.”

that he was quitting. He could no longer take how rapidly the environmental destruction of the lower 48 was proceeding; he would be flying off to Alaska later that day, to see and dwell in as much true wilderness as he could before it was all gone. Two hours later, we heard a report that he had stopped all traffic heading toward Washington National Airport by walking down the middle of the express lane.

At the end of another week, there was a shooting in the all-night restaurant below our office. I was fast asleep on the mailbags, my makeshift bed this whole time. After the shooting, the senior staff decided that no one was to remain in the office after dark, so I was left without a place to sleep.

After two months of working under the mentorship of “civil rights summer” vets, antiwar activists, and environmental advocates, I returned once more to school. Life returned to normal, until a few weeks later, when Teach-In’s Midwest coordinator received a request from a small Catholic college over on the Mississippi River.

The nun in charge asked if Teach-In could suggest someone “youthful” to speak at their college’s Earth Day celebration. My

colleagues in Washington remembered that I lived not too far away from the Mississippi River. And that is how, with no formal interview, no background check, and no work experience, I became a featured presenter on the very first Earth Day.

I’d never given a speech in public, certainly not in front of strangers. I stayed up for most of the night before the event, trying to prepare for the task that I’d inexplicably been given. But when I woke up the next morning and I felt in my pocket the folded piece of paper I’d worked on all night, all I saw on it were a few lines of handwritten verse—not exactly the rousing oratory I’d hoped to find.

I hitchhiked two hours toward the Mississippi, arriving at the college a few minutes before the event was to start. A young nun greeted me with a mischievous smile.

“Have you given many speeches?” she asked.

I shook my head, unable to even open my mouth in response.

The nun took my hand. “Don’t get jittery, honey,” she said. “Don’t you worry none. Just pretend you’re offering a prayer. Talking to God, giving thanks. As long as you don’t get into overpopulation and abortion, you’ll be okay.”

I have no recollection what I had planned to say that day, but I don’t believe it concerned either of those topics.

I remember being brought to the college chapel, where the window looked out on a view of eagles moving from tree to tree. The eagles had gathered that day among the towering cottonwood trees that grew along the overtopped banks of a swollen tributary of the Mississippi. They perched and watched for fish in the sediment-rich water that moved forward out of the side streams to blend into the Big Muddy itself.

To those eagles, the inflated catfish in the river, the Mississippi River fishermen, the sweet-hearted sisters of that faith-based community, the children chewing paint chips—whatever words I may have spoken on that first Earth Day were directed as much toward them as they were to the people before me.

And if I can’t recall any words I said that day when I was brought out on stage, it’s as much because of my nerves as because my feeble, wavering voice could never have been heard by those gathered near the river. The sound of people and nature was overwhelming. I was present at the dawning of Creation, the first gathering of two-leggeds, four-leggeds, winged ones, and rooted ones, and all had come to express their joy and sorrow in being part of this planet-sanctuary that was careening through space and time.

Years later I would become a Franciscan brother, heartened by the teachings of Saint Francis himself—the patron saint of ecology—who urged his followers, “go out and preach the Good News, and only when necessary, use words.” ○

Full Moon

All evening the trees grow loud with a rumor
passed back and forth on the ribs of cicadas.
Then the yard turns blue; the old barn leans in.
And what we’d forgotten all month comes true.

—David Baker